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SUBJECT: (C-AL9-01941) LEADERSHIP PROFILE: ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA PM
BALDWIN SPENCER

CLASSIFIED BY: D. B Hardt, Charge d'Affaires a.i., DOS; REASON:
1.4(B), (D)

Summary

¶1. (C/NF) Prime Minister Baldwin Spencer has gradually grown into his role as the dominant figure in Antiguan politics and, with his recent electoral victory, looks set to remain in power through ¶2014. Despite his decision to join ALBA and PetroCaribe and the fawning pro-ALBA rhetoric it has occasionally fostered, Spencer is a canny politician who will continue to play to both sides with hopes of increasing aid to his financially strapped country. Spencer has made no attempts to alter Antigua's democratic foundations or its close ties to the U.S., nor has he given any sign that he is inclined to do so in the future. End Summary.

Man of the People

¶2. (C/NF) From 1989 until 1999, Baldwin Spencer and one MP representing Barbuda were the only members of parliament who were not also members of the then-governing Antigua Labour Party. After the 1994 elections, capitalizing on growing frustration with an entrenched and increasingly corrupt ALP, Spencer merged his United National Democratic Party with other independent parties in the country to form the United Progressive Party. As the only sitting member of parliament going into the 1999 election, he was "the" leader of the opposition in parliament and the natural choice to lead the new party. The newly formed UPP took four seats in the 1999 elections, and then, in 2004, finally swept into power, taking 12 of the 17 seats in parliament. Outside of a brief period between 1976-1980, this was the first time that a party other than the ALP, controlled by the powerful Bird family, had been in charge of the country.

¶3. (C/NF) A labor organizer by background, Spencer has a common man appeal that endears him well to the average Antiguan voter. Not widely considered to be an intellectual, he is a polished orator who likes to speak in personal vignettes. Spencer is a passionate devotee of carnival, and has long spearheaded one of Antigua's largest carnival bands. He routinely dresses up and

"plays mas," earning considerable goodwill among Antiguan in the process. Spencer is known for dressing in traditional garb even at formal occasions.

Still Sitting on the Fence?

14. (C/NF) As the leader of a nascent coalition of parties that had been in the political wilderness for so many years, Spencer was slow to put his personal stamp on his party and on the overall direction of the country. However, his power over the party and the direction of the country has grown significantly in recent years. This is particularly true in foreign policy. Spencer's past as a labor organizer and a leftist-populist have been fairly consistently reflected in his public remarks and recent activity with regional powers. He has continued a long-standing tradition of cooperation with and support for Cuba, which benefited Antigua in the form of medical assistance from Cuba -- both training of physicians and free eye operations under Operacion Milagro. More recently, Spencer has appeared to move closer to Venezuela, joining both PetroCaribe and ALBA -- and becoming a vocal advocate for the latter, including in his address to the United Nations General Assembly. In his address to the UN General Assembly Spencer said, "Antigua and Barbuda encourages the Community of Nations to explore

alternative models such as that represented by ALBA. With its foundations principles of complementarity as an alternative to competition; solidarity as opposed to domination; cooperation as a replacement for exploitation; and respect for sovereignty rather than corporate rule, ALBA represents an innovation and viable model of integration and development."

Pragmatist at Heart

15. (C/NF) Most educated Antiguan are suspicious of Iran, Libya and particularly Venezuela, and warn us of their fears about the direction that Spencer is taking the country. While some of these fears are genuinely felt, in many cases they are generated more from opportunism on the part of opposition figures eager to increase U.S. attention to Antigua and sympathy with the ALP, or, in the case of government figures like National Security Minister Errol Cort, an attempt to encourage the U.S. to increase development and security assistance." Spencer's rhetoric does little to calm those fears, whether genuine or not, as he tends to be critical of the West and its traditional institutions and supportive, and occasionally fawning, towards Venezuela and Cuba in particular. Behind the rhetoric, Spencer's foreign policy decision-making remains calculating and pragmatic. His decisions to join PetroCaribe and ALBA are driven by the very real, and increasingly desperate, need for financial support. Antigua, like many Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the region will pay lip-service to anyone writing them checks. With the Stanford scandal decimating Antigua's offshore finance sector, and employment numbers and tourism down, it would be politically risky to be seen turning down offers of assistance from any quarter.

16. (C/NF) Spencer and his government have been receptive partners with the USG on a broad range of issues. The Prime Minister has publicly voiced strong support for the Obama Administration, and highlighted that support by naming Antigua's highest mountain peak in President Obama's honor. Support for the President is very

strong throughout Antiguan society, and it is good politics to be seen to be close to the United States. Spencer's government has also actively cultivated relationships with key members of the U.S. congress. During recent Independence celebrations, the Prime Minister went out of his way to invite the Charge to join him and the Governor General at the head table, along with Ambassadors from Venezuela and South Africa.

17. (C/NF) We received excellent support from every level of government and public praise from the highest levels for the visit of the USNS Comfort, which provided medical services to roughly one-third of the population of Antigua. Spencer himself visited the ship and turned up for medical care during the visit - a sign of his support for this tangible delivery of support for the Antigua people. We have received similar support on WTO issues, as the GOAB has not only chosen not to "cash in" the favorable award it received from the WTO over internet gambling, but in fact took swift action to shut down an online video pirating site that tried to establish itself in that country following the award. Despite the ALBA agreement, including a clause committing all members to reject foreign military bases on their soil, the GOAB in September renewed a five-year agreement to host a USAF satellite tracking station. The GOAB has worked closely with the FBI on the Stanford case, agreeing to extradite its SEC chair-equivalent to face fraud charges in the U.S., and the government is working with us to finalize a Proliferation Security Initiative shipboarding agreement.

Comment: The Bottom Line

17. (C/NF) As the leader of a debt-burdened, vulnerable micro-economy in the midst of a global recession, Spencer can ill afford to turn his nose up at assistance from any quarter. Whether such aid materializes fully or not (and in the case of Venezuela, it appears most often "not"), even the smallest contributions help secure the UPP political breathing room in the short term. Couple this need with Spencer's own instinctive affinity for leftist-populist rhetoric, and a casual observer could conclude that Antigua might be moving closer to Hugo Chavez's leftist regional orbit. Spencer's actions, however, especially the UPP's solid record of cooperation with the USG, make clear that the rhetoric is part of a balancing act intended to secure support from non-traditional partners. Absent a significant infusion of support from the USG, Spencer has little incentive to change this public tune. But, as a pragmatist, he is unlikely to risk concrete support from the U.S. to secure promises from Venezuela.
HARDT